

What If?

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The difficulty using religion as an analogy to tempt people to consider 'What if the fundamental concept is wrong?' when it comes to thinking about things 'horse' is that the religious may have too much of an unswerving and blind faith in the core subject to step outside of their given belief or faith, even for just a moment, to be objective or consider the 'what if'.

My 'Devil's Advocate' put this to me when I announced what I thought was a clear and definitive analogy to use to encourage horse owners to step outside their paradigm to consider 'other' ways of doing things. My quest for an easily understood and obvious discussion point (don't want to use the word 'argument' here) comes from a fascinating frustration with coming to terms with horse owners who won't, can't or don't want to see or consider that there are other and perhaps better ways of doing things with their horses.

As a barehoof advocate (and general horse liberationist) the original idea came to me from this thought: To get 'shod thinking' people to just consider that there may be another and maybe better way of achieving their goal hoofwise. For example, that barehoof care can and does work and is, in the majority of cases, much better for the horse. To do this they may firstly have to consider that 'what if my basic premise, concept, understanding and thinking on hoof care (horse shoeing thinking) is wrong?' In the religious context the same idea may be put: What if the basic premise, concept, understanding and thinking about god is wrong?

If the foundation principle is flawed then everything that is built upon it stands on shaky ground. And often the 'foundation principle' (in this example, nailing a piece of unforgiving steel onto a living creature) was developed at a time when human knowledge and understanding was, compared to today, limited. The 'scientific' understanding was nil or very inadequate. Under the scrutiny of clear and logical and informed thinking, it, (the old thought or understanding) is unstable and likely to collapse. Remember that not too long ago most of humanity thought the world was flat.

Recently a competent horseman, busy farrier and a good bloke (the same person) told me that the frog in a hoof pumped the blood. That was his understanding; probably based on what someone had told him. He wasn't the first person to make this statement to me either. In a past life when I used a farrier to shoe my horses, he himself made this statement - and I believed him! I supported and perpetuated this myth until I read and studied hoof anatomy and dissected quite a few hooves and discovered that there are no blood vessels in the frog and very few above it in the digital cushion. Others who had made similar observations concluded that the frog was part cushioning device, part flexibility device and part traction device. These conclusions were based on looking at what a hoof did or was supposed to do in its natural state as it impacted the ground in a natural hoof fall. They also concluded (and I have to agree) that the whole hoof, when it is acting in a normal and healthy way, pumps the blood. It's commonly called 'hoof function'. Unfortunately - for the horse - a fitted horseshoe prevents or severely restricts vital circulation in its lower limb and hoof.

So what if the basic premise and understanding on traditional hoof shoeing *is* wrong?

Just as what if the basic premises and understanding of say horse racing or endurance competitions or jumps racing or show jumping or dressage competitions or barrel racing or polo or polocrosse or eventing or trail riding or general horse care are wrong, misguided or misunderstood (from the horse's point of view)? Or partly wrong even? What if our foundation understanding of any of these activities is partly unstable? What if, indeed? Usually, it is the horse that suffers.

Alternatively there may be no right or wrong. There may be 'what is' and 'what is better'. Because human and horse needs are so very different we and the horse see things from a totally different perspective. Apart from the fact that we stand on the opposite side of the predator/prey fence, winning or being successful or having a wall full of trophies or ribbons doesn't mean too much to a horse. What we believe is best for us and is best for our horse has to often contend with the reality that these are often two quite divergent points of view.

I also find it strange though that for some people it is quite okay to whip (padded whip or not) a racehorse to try and win a race and prize money and yet if the same treatment was meted out, in public, on a dog, child or spouse the person doing the whipping would be promptly arrested and charged with various cruelty or abuse offences. I was told by a racehorse owner (who curiously is also a vet) that whipping a racehorse was okay as it "just urged them on". It is strange, isn't it? Maybe our understanding and acceptance of horse racing is flawed? Or maybe it should be okay to give infants a whipping because they are losing a soccer game, or performing poorly at kindergarten, or not riding their pony properly – just to 'urge them on'?

In a slightly different field; what if our belief is that it is okay to keep a horse (or horses) in a small house block that is bare and has little natural nutritious feed because it is convenient for us? What if that belief is wrong or not in the best interests of the horse? What if it is our belief that we should protect the horse from the elements during the weather extremes by rugging them and this is not in the horse's best interests either? Are rugging horse owners acting in the absolute best interests of the horse or are they victims of fashion, marketing or guilt or a misguided, but popular, desire to do what's best for their horse? Again I find it strange that many horse owners who choose this rugging (and unnatural) regime for their horse during the cooler months do not or will not take the rug off when the daytime temperature rises to a level to make the rugged horse uncomfortably and unhealthily hot or just as weird, rip off the rug when it is still chilly because they are off to work for the day. Is this misguided? Is this inconsistent? Or is it just too inconvenient to remove the 'doona combo' mid morning when the frost has thawed and the day has warmed?

Is rugging a horse based on a flawed premise or idea that some horses *need* extra protection during the different seasons? Do these horse rugging people wonder why the horses down the road or up in the mountains survive the winter quite happily without rugs? Sure they are a little dirtier but they are not sweating profusely under several layers of synthetic material when the sun is out.

Why don't we rug cows?

To put all this another way; perhaps we can ask ourselves and our horses, "Is what I ask of you; are the ways we choose to look after you; are the things we do together and the ways we do them really serving us both as well as they could?" And, "What could we do or have we to do or can we do to make things better?"

Having got all that off my chest I have to reluctantly admit that there are two things I now know about human beings. Firstly, generally we will change something if and only when we are ready and no amount of berating, stimulating discussion or threats will convince us otherwise. The second thing is that humans by and large are resistant to change. This I find even more interesting as the only thing that is constant in the world is.....change. Why some of us resist it is a futile exercise. It will get us eventually.

I feel if everyone who has contact with a horse in any way, shape or form went through the above self examination process honestly and considered what they could change to make things for themselves and their horse better, then the world would be a much nicer place, for horses and humans.

It would be a very good start.